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❀ 7 ❀

ISLAMIZATION OF ARMENIANS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE: THE HAMSHENTSI/HEMSHINLI CASE

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This survey of the Islamized Armenians of the district of Hamshen or Hemshin is an outgrowth of a request of the late Alexandre Bennigsen for information on Armenian sources about members of a particular population he had encountered in Soviet Central Asia.[1] These were the Hemshinli/Hemşinli, who had been deported from the Caucasus, especially Ajaria, on Stalin's orders in 1944. They were "a punished people," along with their neighbors the Meskhs/Meskhetians (Turkish-speaking Georgians), the Chechens, and other Caucasian Muslims. The Hemshinli and Meskhetians were punished, not for having collaborated with the Germans, as Hitler's armies did not reach the South Caucasus, but rather for preemptive reasons stemming from fear of their eventual collusion with compatriots living across the border in Turkey.[2]

In their book on Muslims in the USSR, Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay estimated the number of Hemshinli in the 1970s to be 1,500 to 2,000.[3] In fact, they are far more numerous,

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[1] A version of this paper was first published as "Aperçu sur l'Islamisation des Arméniens dans l'Empire ottoman: Le cas des *Hamchentsi/Hemşinli*," in Mercedès Garcia-Arenal, ed., *Conversions islamiques: Identités religieuses en Islam méditerranéen/Islamic Conversions: Religious Identities in Mediterranean Islam* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2002), pp. 399-418. I wish to thank Professors Nina Garsoïan and Richard Hovannisian for their assistance in translating and editing this chapter.

[2] See Aleksandr M. Nekrich, *The Punished Peoples* (New York: Norton, 1978); Jacques Kayaloff, "The Khemshels: Another Deported Nationality," *Armenian Review* 33:2 (1980): 216-17; Jean-Jacques Marie, *Les peuples déportés d'Union soviétique* (Brussels: Complexe, 1995). Hovann H. Simonian, "The Vanished Khemshins: Return from the Brink," *Journal of Genocide Research* 4:3 (Sept. 2002): 375-85.

[3] Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Les musulmans oub-*

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the figures varying from 50,000 to 100,000 and much higher when including the Hemshinli in Turkey. In the Soviet Union, most people of Hamshen/Hemshin origins are Armenian Christians identified as Hamshentsi or Hamshetsi (Russian: Khemshin/Khemshil/Khemshel), who decades earlier fled to Russia to avoid conversion or who reverted to their original religion after having emigrated. Many of the Christian Hamshentsis who settled in the Crimea were also deported by Stalin in 1944 (with local Tatars, Bulgars, and Greeks) for allegedly having collaborated with the Germans or assisting the German-sponsored "Armenian Legion."

The paucity of sources makes a scientific study difficult, especially as Armenian conversion to Islam has been a taboo subject. The Armenians pride themselves on their ancient Christianity, their autocephalous national church, which separated from the rest of Christianity in the Oriental schism following the Council of Chalcedon in 451,[4] and their cultural specificity resulting from the creation of a distinct alphabet in the fifth century. Their identity was forged in the tradition of heroic martyrdom for the Christian faith at the battle of Avarair also in 451) against Zoroastrian Persia, in the resistance to Orthodox Byzantium and to the Muslim Arabs and Turks, and in the continuing struggle for self-preservation until the genocide of 1915. Witnesses and survivors of the genocide often mention offers of conversion to Islam—usually rejected—as the only way to escape deportation and death.

The fusion of national and religious sentiment was intensified by the Ottoman confessional-based *millet* system of administration. The conversion of some Armenians to Catholicism since the seventeenth century and the establishment of a de-facto separate Catholic millet in 1831 or else the conversion to Protestantism since the nineteenth century and the formation of the Protestant millet in 1850 were long viewed as betrayal of the national community. A fortiori, any conversion to Islam and the impossibility of apostasy and return to Christianity became a radical breach within the Armenian corpus that was preferably forgotten. A nineteenth-century article in Armenian dealing with the Muslim Hemshinli was appropriately titled "Lost and Forgotten

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liés: L'Islam en URSS aujourd'hui (Paris: François Maspéro, 1981). See also Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire: A Guide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

[4] Cf. Nina Garsoïan, *L'Eglise arménienne et le grand schisme d'Orient* (Louvain: Peeters, 1999).

Armenians."[5] The conversion of members of this group to Islam is explained only as the result of coercion. Spiritual or opportunistic conversions are not easily acknowledged except as individual acts that are heavily stigmatized. The case of the Hamshentsi Armenians, who long preserved their original language and even a form of crypto-Christianity, is fraught with a still more perplexing problem—that of maintenance of national identity even after having "turned" from Christianity. The Hamshentsi case is the only relatively well-known and recognized one, although this phenomenon is far more extensive and concerns the entire Ottoman Empire.[6] There is, however, no general reference work on the Islamization of Armenians.

For the Turks or for Muslims in general, as well as for certain Orientalists who are committed to the rehabilitation of Islam and the Ottoman Empire, the concept of forced conversion is rejected or questioned. In *Histoire de l'Empire ottoman*, edited by Robert Mantran, authors such as Nicoarae Baldiceanu and Gilles Veinstein consider forced conversion as rare, since it was not favored by the state for fear of losing the benefit of special taxes such as the *jizye*. Islam, they maintain, was tolerant as demonstrated by the case of the Jews driven from Spain and the spiritual and cultural freedom granted to "peoples of the Book" who "enjoyed" the status of protected clients or *dhimmi*. Nor were the dhimmi displeased with the *devshirme* (child levy)—although this was one of the most overt means of forcible conversion—as many families, it is said, may have used this practice that entailed the transformation of Christian children into Muslim officials and soldiers as a means of social and economic advancement.[7]

It may be argued, of course, that the jizye could always be obtained under various guises and through new taxes and that the status of dhimmi was both discriminatory and humiliating. Although the dhimmi status allowed the Christian and Jewish communities to main-

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[5] Sargis Haykuni, "Korats ev moratsvats hayer: Sev getatsik" [Lost and Forgotten Armenians. The Armenians of the Black River], *Ararat* (Echmiadzin) (July-August 1895): 239-43, 293-97.

[6] See, for example, Garegin Amatuni [Karekin Amadian], *Dareru entatskin trkatsats hayer, krdatsats hayer* [Down through the Centuries, Turkified Armenians, Kurdified Armenians] (Beirut: Shirak, 1980).

[7] Robert Mantran, ed., *Histoire de l'Empire ottoman* (Paris: Fayard, 1989). See especially Nicoarae Baldiceanu, "L'organisation de l'Empire ottoman, XIV^{e}-XV^{e} siècles," pp. 117-38, and Gilles Veinstein, "L'empire dans sa grandeur, XVI^{e} siècle," pp. 159-226.

tain a semi-autonomous religious and cultural life, it nevertheless also implied that the discriminatory fiscal and social pressures could be surmounted only through conversion to Islam or to one of the foreign "protected" religions (Catholicism and Protestantism). It is also possible to cite as many prescriptions to intolerance as to tolerance in the tenets of Islam. Indeed, the practices of Muslim governments toward the conversion of infidels were uniform neither in time nor in space.

Clearly, the process of Islamization and Turkification of Asia Minor between the eleventh and sixteenth century was not merely the result of migrations and demographic growth of the conquerors but primarily because of widespread conversion or at least external adhesion to the faith of those holding military superiority or political power. Contemporary minimizing of the phenomenon of forced conversion may be regarded as an indication of a certain Western patronizing attitude toward Christian peoples in the Near East who were unable to preserve their sovereignty and instead had to settle for an inferior tolerated status.

Since the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War in the 1940s, the Western objective of safeguarding the territorial integrity and secularism of Turkey against Soviet pressure, Muslim fundamentalism, and Kurdish separatism have led certain powers to defend implicitly the myth of Turkish unity—a myth that might burst were there recognition of forcible conversion or the continuing existence of various non-Turkish ethnic (especially Muslim) groups. The debate between the nation-state and the mosaic-state theory regarding Turkey has gone on for a long time and its bloody results have been seen in the suppression of the Kurds and Alevis just as previously they were manifested in the elimination of the Armenian and Greek elements.

This discussion does not focus so much on the spiritual and religious aspects of conversion, which apply more to the individual than to collective cases, as it does on the political and social pressures on the inhabitants in contested border regions. From a national point of view, this implies a reassessment not only of Armenian identity but also of the composition of the modern Turkish nation-state. Despite the Turkish government's firm stand on a unified ideology, questions arise about religious syncretism and crypto-Christianity equivalent to that of the Marranos in the Iberian Peninsula. These seem to entail strategies devised by national and/or religious minorities through camouflage or overlaying of identities.

The Sources

Armenian sources on the first waves of Islamization of the Hamshentsis in the seventeenth century are virtually non-existent because of the destruction of monasteries and other Armenian institutions with archives. In addition to research *in situ* or studies of comparable cases, especially with Greek-speaking Muslims or Georgian Muslims, other types of repositories must be consulted:

1) State archives, primarily Ottoman; Russian/Soviet archives, which are now more accessible; diplomatic archives of countries having a presence in the area;

2) Religious archives, both Muslim and Christian, especially those of the Armenian Church housed in the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Catholicosate of Echmiadzin; the archives of Catholic missions (there was an Armenian Catholic See at Trebizond).[8]

In addition to general works on Islam, the Ottoman Empire, the minorities and the status of dhimmis, travel accounts, and a few recent Western works, this discussion relies primarily on published sources and ethnographic works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[9] For the origins and history of the principality of Hamshen, references may

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[8] Les *mémoires de Mgr.Jean Naslian, évêque de Trébizonde, sur les événements politico-religieux en Proche-Orient de 1914 à 1918*, 2 vols. (Vienna: Mekhitarist Press, 1951).

[9] See, for instance, Robert Mantran, *Histoire de l'Empire ottoman;* Speros Vryonis, Jr., *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the 11th through the 15th Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1971); Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, eds., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 2 vols; Laurent and Annie Chabry, *Politiques et minorités au Proche-Orient: Les raisons d'une explosion* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1987); Antoine Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'Islam* (Beirut: Imp. catholique, 1958); Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam*, trans. David Maisel, Paul Fenton, and David Littman (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/Associated University Presses, and London: AUP, 1985; 6th printing, 2003); idem, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude, 7th-20th Century*, foreword by Jacques Ellul, trans. from French by Miriam Kochan and David Littman (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/Associated University Presses, and London: AUP, 1996; 5th printing, 2003); Nehemia Levtzion, ed., *Conversion to Islam* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1979); Yousseff Courbage and Philippe Fargues, *Chrétiens et Juifs dans l'Islam arabe et turc* (Paris: Payot, 1997); Gérard Dédeyan, ed., *Histoire du peuple arménien* (Toulouse: Privat, 2007); Raymond H. Kévorkian and Michel Paboudjian, *Les Arméniens dans l'Empire ottoman à la veille du génocide* (Paris: Editions d'Arts et d'Histoire, 1992).

be sought in chronicles up to the fifteenth century and even as late as the seventeenth century,[10] as well as traveler accounts, such as those of the Armenian Hetum (fourteenth century)[11] and the Spanish Ruy González de Clavijo (fifteenth century).[12] Issues of conversion are raised only in nineteenth-century travel accounts, especially those of Protestant missionaries Eli Smith and H.G.D. Dwight (1830-31)[13] and of German botanist Karl Koch (1844),[14] as well as in the studies of the Armenian Catholic Mekhitarist fathers Ghukas Inchichian (Injijian),[15] Minas Bzhshkian (Pzhishgian),[16] and especially Hakovbos Tashian (Hagop Dashian),[17] who prepared a monumental work on the region, of which he himself was a native. Ethnographic and ethno-linguistic studies appeared from the end of the nineteenth century, among them being those of Sargis Haykuni (research done in the 1860s and published in 1895),[18] P. Tumayian (written 1870s and published in

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[10] See, for instance, one of the rare surviving chronicles of the seventeenth century by Hakovb Karnetsi (Jacob of Karin [Erzerum]). There exists a French translation: "Erzeroum ou la topographie de la Haute-Arménie," trans. Frédéric Macler, *Journal Asiatique* (March-April 1919): 153-257. Medieval texts have been edited and analyzed by Levon Khachikyan, "Ejer hamshenahayeri patmutyunits" [Pages from the History of the Hamshen Armenians], *Banber Erevani Hamalsarani* [Herald of Erevan University] 2 (1969): 115-44.

[11] Héthoum l'historien [Het'um Lambronac'i], *Les Fleurs des Hystoires de la terre d'Orient* (Paris: Denis Janot, n.d.); *A Lyttel cronycle: Richard Pyson's translation (c. 1520) of "La Fleur des Histoires de la terre d'Orient" (c. 1307)*, ed. Glenn Burger (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1988).

[12] Ruy González de Clavijo, *Narrative of the Embassy to Tamerlane, 1403-1406*, trans. Guy Le Strange (London: Routledge, 1928).

[13] Among the reports sent to the emissaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Armenia and Persia, those of Eli Smith and Harrison Gray Otis Dwight have been published under the title, *Missionary Research in Armenia*, 2 vols. (London: G. Wightmann, 1834).

[14] Karl Koch, *Wanderungen im Oriente während der Jahre 1843 und 1844*, vol. 2: *Reise im pontischen Gebirge und türkischen Armenien* (Weimar: Druck und Verlag des Landes Industrie Comptoirs, 1846).

[15] Ghukas Inchichian, *Ashkharhagrutiun chorits masants ashkharhi* [Geography of the Four Parts of the World] (Venice: Mekhitarist Press, 1802-1806).

[16] Minas Bzhshkian, *Patmutiun Pontosi or e Sev Tsov* [History of Pontus on the Black Sea] (Venice: Mekhitarist Press, 1819).

[17] Jacobus Dashian [Hakovbos Tashian], *La population arménienne de la région comprise entre la mer Noire et Karin (Erzeroum): Rapide coup d'œil historique et ethnographique*, trans. Frédéric Macler from Armenian, *Hay bnakchutiune Sev tsoven minchev Karin* (Vienna: Mekhitarist Press, 1921).

[18] See note 5 above, and Sargis Haykuni, "Hay Gaspare" [The Armenian Gaspar], *Ararat* (Oct. 1895): 397-400.

1899),[19] Hakob Muradiants (1898-1900), Hakob Manandian (1903),[20] Hrachia Acharian (Ajarian, 1911),[21] and Georges Dumézil (1960s). There are also publications from the Soviet period,[22] original monographs of a commemorative nature published in the Diaspora,[23] and the Armenian press.[24] Rüdiger Benninghaus lists the Turkish sources with critical analyses in a collaborative work intended to give a comprehensive inventory of the various ethnic groups making up present-day Turkey.[25]

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[19] See P. Tumaian, "Pontosi Hayere: Ashkharhagrakan ev kaghakakan vichak Trabizoni" [The Pontic Armenians. Geographical and Political Situation of Trebizond], *Luma* (Tiflis) 2 (1899): 144-92.

[20] Hakob Manandian, "Hayots nor vkaner: Ter Karapet kahana Torosletsi" [New Armenian Martyrs: Father Karapet the Priest of Torosli], *Ararat* (1903): 702-09.

[21] Hrachia Acharian, "Haykakan barbaragitutiun: Hamsheni barbar" [Armenian Dialectology: The Dialect of Hamshen], *Eminian azgagrakan zhoghovatsu* [Eminian Ethnographic Anthology] (Moscow, 1911), pp. 184-98.

[22] See Levon Khachikyan, "Ejer hamshinahay patmutyunits" [Pages from the History of Armenians of Hamshen], *Banber Erevani Hamalsarani* 2 (1969): 115-44; Barunak K. Torlakyan, "Hamshenahayeri masin" [About Hamshen Armenians] *Banber* Erevani Hamalsarani 2 (1970): 197-202; idem, "Hamshenahayeri bnakaranayin hamalire" [The Residential Complex of Hamshen Armenians], *Patma-banasirakan handes* [Historico-Philological Journal] 2 (1970): 93-104; idem, "Hamshenahayeri ev pontahayeri bnakavayrere u tvakanake 1914 tvakanin" [The Location and Number of Hamshen Armenians and Pontic Armenians in 1914], *Patma-banasirakan handes* 2 (1970): 202-15. See also N.G. Volkova, *Etnicheskii sostav naseleniia Severnogo Kavkaza v XVII–nachale XX veka* [Ethnic Structure of the North-Caucasus Population from Eighteenth to the Beginning of Twentieth Century] (Moscow, 1974); L. Petrosyan, "Hamshen," in *Haykakan Sovetakan hanragitaran* [Armenian Soviet Encyclopedia], vol. 6 (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1980), p. 119.

[23] Hovakim Hovakimian, *Patmutiun Haykakan Pontosi* [History of Armenian Pontus] (Beirut: Mshak Press, 1967), pp. 54-71 and *passim.*

[24] Sergei Vardanyan, "Hamshentsiner tsanot ev antsanot" [Hamshentsis, Known and Unknown], *Garun* [Spring] (Erevan), 11 (1982): 60-73; republished in *Haratch* [Forward] (Paris), Feb. 12-13, 1983; Sero Khanzadyan, "Ejer chambordakan oragrits" [Pages from (My) Travel Diary], *Sovetakan Hayastan* [Soviet Armenia] (Erevan) 10 (1986): 23-25; Vardan Grigoryan, "Hamshenahayeri mshakutayin tone," [The Cultural Festival of Hamshen Armenians], *Hayreniki dzayn* [Voice of the Fatherland] (Erevan), Jan. 28, 1987, p. 4; Alvard Ghazinyan, "Nshkharner Hamsheni ev Trabizoni banahyusutyan" [Relics of the Folklore of Hamshen and Trebizond], *Hayreniki dzayn*, March 25, 1987.

[25] Rüdiger Benninghaus, "Zur Herkunft und Identität der Hemşinli," in Peter A. Andrews, ed., *Ethnic Groups in Turkey* (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 1989), pp. 475-87. For comparative purposes, see Alexandre Toumarkine, *Les Lazes en Turquie (XVII^e-XX^e siècles)* (Istanbul: Isis, 1995); Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995); Uwe Bläsing, *Armenisches Lehngut im Türkeitürkischen: Am*

The Historical Dimension

The term Hamshen in Armenian or Hemshin/Hemşin in Turkish designates a geographic region, a district in the Laz back country overlapping the provinces of Rize and Artvin to the Chorokh River, which marks its eastern border. As in the case of the Pontic Mountains, which form a barrier rising to 3,700 meters/12,100 feet above sea level at Mount Kachkar, this district offers a compartmentalized landscape made up of isolated valleys and forested slopes. Access is very difficult. Although the barrier of the Pontic Alps and its extension to the Caucasus Mountains is the northern limit of the Armenian Plateau or Highland, an Armenian presence on the Pontic coast since antiquity is attested by classical Greek writers. Under the Roman/Byzantine Justinian emperors in the sixth century A.D., parts of Armenia Minor or Lesser Armenia (lying to the northwest of Greater Armenia) reached the Black Sea as far as Batum, even though the coastal regions were peopled primarily by Greeks and by Laz and other Georgian tribes. According to Armenian chroniclers, among them Ghevond,[26] the province of Hamshen takes its name from Prince Hamam Amatuni. With his father, Shapuh, other princes, and some 12,000 men (perhaps families), he had fled from his original domain in the land of Ararat (west of Lake Sevan) at the end of the eighth century to escape the increasingly heavy military and fiscal pressures of the Arab governors (*ostikan*) of Armenia, especially 'Ubaidulla-ibn-Al and his Greek renegade son-in-law. Seeking refuge in the "world of the Greeks"—ancient Chaldia—in 788-90, the Armenians encountered and fought the Georgian army of Prince Vashdean, an uncle of Prince Hamam. The city of Tambur, destroyed during the combat, was reconstructed by Hamam, whence its name of *Hamamashen* (shen = constructed or built), in time the name contracting into "Hamshen." There are, of course, other hypotheses on the origin of this toponym, whether they be the Armenian popular etymology referring to the brothers Ham and Shem of the Bible or the Turkish etymology deriving the name from the aggregation of the Turkish words *hem* = really and shen = prosperous, or *emshen* = lamb skin, as the cloth material of a certain Turkish tribe, or again the

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Beispiel von Hemşin (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1992). Hovann Simonian has published a collection of articles under the title, *The Hemshin* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

[26] Ghevond, *Histoire des guerres et des conquêtes des Arabes*, trans. G. Chahnazarian (Paris, 1857).

Iranian *hemnishin*, meaning "living in common" as an Oghuz tribe. The latter are the theories cited by Benninghaus which seek a Turkish genealogy for almost every group in Turkey as propagated by the Turkish Institute of History since its creation in the 1930s. According to Fahrettin M. Kirzioğlu, the Hemshinli were either a Balkar tribe (a Turkish people of the Caucasus whose language belongs to the Kipchak group) or an Oghuz tribe whose ancestors had come with the Iranian Arsacids, first to Khorasan, then to Hamadan, where they assumed the name of Hamatuni, before settling in the region of Hamshen around 620 A.D.

Medieval Armenian sources bear witness to currents of migration to this refuge, "a dark country, with high summits and deep valleys hidden in fog" as the result of Arab-Byzantine wars or internal disorder. According to these sources, some of the people stayed in the mountains, while others pushed to the coast where Armenian princes from the House of Amatuni allied themselves with the rulers of Lazistan. The fall of Ani, capital of the Armenian Bagratuni (Bagratid) kingdom, to the Byzantines in 1045 and to the Seljuks in 1064, prompted a new flow of migration toward Trebizond and the Black Sea. The Christian Hamshentsis of Russia, for instance, claim to be the descendants of Ani, having crossed the sea in search of safe haven. In fact, there is little information on the medieval period except in some rare manuscripts, mostly in colophons. The borders of the Hamshen principality may have reached as far as Sper, one of the bastions of the Bagratunis. In the ninth and tenth centuries, the influence of the Bagratunis was predominant through the interaction of military and matrimonial alliances, though not without contests between the Armenian and Georgian branches of the dynasty. It is likely that the construction of Ardashen on the coast was linked to these princely rivalries. In the thirteenth century, after the sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade, two fleeing Comneni princes founded the Empire of Trebizond, which encompassed Greek, Georgian, and Armenian lands. The principality of Hamshen in the theme of Chaldia apparently became a vassal of Trebizond but preserved a semi-independent existence in its mountainous stronghold.

After the decline of the Empire of Trebizond, Hamshen passed successively under the suzerainty of the emir of Baiburt, then the fearsome Jelalis, and finally, in the 1360s, to Leng Timur (Tamerlane). De Clavijo, who passed through the region at the beginning of the fifteenth century on his return from Samarkand, mentions the replace-

ment of the Armenian prince Arakel by a Muslim governor and then the restoration of Arakel, possibly as the result of strong popular discontent. The relative autonomy that is evident in this episode is based on the district's strategic role as guardian of the transit routes granted to local princes, who occasionally even refused to pay tribute to their overlords.

Like Armenia and Iran, the Hamshen district passed under the control of the Turkmen Kara-Koyunlu (Black Sheep) confederation at the beginning of the fifteenth century until the successors of Prince Arakel, the barons Davit and Vard, assumed power in 1420-22. They were able to rule semi-independently while maintaining good relations with the Kara-Koyunlu. Following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople (1453) and of Trebizond (1461), continued Turkish expansion put an end to the principality in around 1489, after as many as eight centuries of existence. Set in an area disputed between the Ottomans and the Persians, the Hamshen would not pass finally under Ottoman control until the middle of the seventeenth century. Some lords or their children who had not died in combat or fled converted to Islam and continued to rule their local domains.

Except for Hakovb, a priest from Karin/Erzerum who describes the region bordering on the Pontus and chronicles events from 1622 to 1662,[27] there are no other Armenian sources on the situation until the beginning of the nineteenth century when the Mekhitarist Father Ghukas Inchichian (1806) and Father Minas Bzhshkian (1819) wrote on the events of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—particularly the conversion to Islam—on the basis of locally-gathered oral accounts. Much of this information found its way into subsequent Armenian and Western sources.

The Conversion

The narratives, all more or less similar, place the first conversions to Islam toward the middle of the seventeenth century, starting first among Chalcedonian Armenians affiliated with the Georgian Orthodox Church. This may be an interesting index of the lesser resistance by a group that no longer belonged to the national Armenian Apostolic Church and adhered to another Christian faith.[28] These Armenians of

[27] Hakovb Karnetsi, "Erzeroum."

[28] It would be interesting to check whether conversion zones are the same as those

the Orthodox rite seem to have followed the example of their Georgian Meskh neighbors who, in order to escape heavy taxation, converted to Islam in about 1635. In the Armenian case, a census ordered by Jafar Mullah of Erzerum in 1642-43 set a new pattern of taxation and increased pressure on the Armenians of Tortum and elsewhere, becoming a significant factor in their opting for collective conversion.[29] This process increased in the late-seventeenth century and early-eighteenth century, reaching a climax in 1708-10 but still continuing until the 1780s.

In the Armenian accounts, Islamization is described as forced conversion through terrorization in which recent Laz and Greek converts actively participated. The fanaticism of the Greek-speaking mullahs of Of is especially underscored. It is interesting to note that in the period when Of was Christian, the Chalcedonian Orthodox clergy of the town were already notorious for their vigorous proselytism of non-Chalcedonian Armenians. There was also the auxiliary role of Laz brigands of Surmene and then of the Janissaries of Trebizond who accused the Armenians of apostasy and rebellion. The fate of the largest village, Torosli, noted by Sargis Haykuni, appears to be characteristic. A mullah from Surmene named Ghuruf oghlu Mehmed with a few disciples succeeded in winning several converts after years of preaching, but he was expelled by the Hamshentsis after proposing an official registration of the conversions. He returned with a fanatic mob and Janissaries, accusing the inhabitants of apostasy. Torosli was taken by surprise and attacked on the Saturday before Easter while the entire population was at church. The priest Karapet was beaten to death, together with many of his parishioners. Survivors who were unable to flee to the forests toward Baiburt or Trebizond were forced to convert on Easter Sunday. Haykuni comments bitterly on the story spread by the mullahs of Of, according to which the Armenians had been converted by a miracle, an apparition of Mohammed which unleashed a torrent of blood.[30] The example of Torosli soon spread to other parts of the Karadere valley.

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of sectarian movements such as those of the Paulicians or the Tondrakians, who fled to areas not too distant from Hamshen to escape persecutions by the Byzantine and Armenian churches.

[29] Hakovb Karnetsi, "Erzeroum," p. 177.

[30] Sargis Haykuni, "Korats ev moratsvats hayer," p. 243.

Islam as a Safety Belt in a Time of Trouble

In contrast with Anatolia where Islamization had begun much earlier, the region of Trebizond was still overwhelmingly Christian at the time of the Ottoman conquest.[31] This picture had already changed by the end of the sixteenth century, as from 1520 to 1585 the proportion of Muslims reportedly rose from 15 to 54 percent.[32] Islamization seems to have begun among the Laz of the coastal areas around 1580. It continued with the Pontic Greeks before extending into the mountain valleys. During the first half of the seventeenth century, however, the Ottoman Empire began to crack as evidenced in the decline of state institutions, the first execution of a sultan in 1622, the power plays by the mothers of sultans and the grand viziers, the intensification of court intrigue, the system of clientelism, the spread of corruption, the military decline with ruinous wars which in turn increased fiscal pressure, and the deterioration of the Janissary system paralleled by the defeat before Vienna (1683) and the first retreat marked by the peace of Karlowicz (1699).

Simultaneously, starting with the first capture of Azov by the Russians (1696), the subsequent expansion of the "Great Neighbor of the North" toward the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and the Caspian Sea appears to have been inevitable. The Pontic coast and its back country became once more strategic zones as they were at the time of the Ottoman and Persian conflicts, but this time facing a Christian power. The systematic Islamization of the region may be seen, therefore, in practical and imperial terms as a means of bolstering both the damaged prestige of the state and the security of the frontier, through the creation of a human safety belt similar to the Russian practice with the Cossacks. External conquest would be replaced by internal conquest. Among political considerations, the local ambitions of the Janissaries of Trebizond, eager to show their power, may have played a role. Ancient national rivalries also contributed as there was an important proselytizing role of recent Greek and Laz converts. The restoration of religious orthodoxy in Islam toward the end of the seventeenth century and the growing role of the clergy must be studied further, but the

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[31] V.L. Menage, "The Islamization of Anatolia," in Levtzion, *Conversion to Islam*, pp. 52-67. The author gives estimates by O.L. Barkan for the years 1520-25 of 1,094 Muslim families and 12,632 Christian families.

[32] Cf. Cem Behar, *Osmanli Imparatorlugu'nun ve Türkiye'nin nüfüsu, 1500-1927* [The Population of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1500-1927] (Ankara: T.C. Başbakanlik Devlet Istatistik Enstitüsü, 1996).

purely religious factor was probably secondary, since the Islamization of the Hamshen seems to have been superficial.

Armenian Marranos?

In Armenian sources, Islamization is indicated either by the simple *kronapokhutiun* (religious conversion) or more often by *tajkatsum* (Turkification), "Tajik" being used in the current sense for "Turk" derived from the Turkmen of Central Asia who came by way of Iran.[33] Thus, to convert to Islam meant to become a Turk, entailing a sense of allegiance and assimilation to the dominant element. In the case of Hamshen, however, converts preserved traces of their earlier religious identity which coincided with the national one. All accounts of nineteenth-century travelers, especially Armenian travelers, stress the crypto-Christianity of the population, which professed Islam only outwardly. In fact, they were called *kes-kes* ("half-half"), a nickname also used derisively by their Laz neighbors.

This phenomenon is most visible among the women, both because they are the main vectors of transmission of moral and religious values and because being isolated from public life and going rarely out of their village, their Christian practices carry fewer consequences than in the case of men. According to early-nineteenth-century Armenian travelers, village women called themselves Armenian as though this were self-evident. They gave as proof the fact that they went to former churches three times a week, lit candles and made offerings, observed the religious holidays and injunctions against sewing and housework on Saturday evenings, made the sign of the Cross on the dough before cutting it, and went on pilgrimages to nearby monasteries and performed the *madagh* (ritual animal sacrifice), actually a vestige from pagan times. Finally, they placed the Bible at the head of the bed of the sick and used *miuron* (holy oil) for the unction of the newborn. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, travelers reported the search by the women for miuron for the baptism of babies and blessed soil to pour over the dead at the funerals. They also noted clandestine visits of priests such as Father Karapet, the son of the priest of the same name

[33] In Persian, *Tajik* is a term used for Arabs, but subsequently used by Armenian authors for all Muslims and eventually Turks. See, for example, *The Epic Histories Attributed to P'awstos Buzand (Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk')*, trans. and comm. Nina G. Garsoïan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

killed at Torosli, who took an oath to return to his village every year until the extinction of his line, an oath that would be honored until 1820, then renewed around 1840 by another family of priests. In his unpublished memoirs, an Armenian priest of the end of the nineteenth century also mentions that several local mullahs were great-grandsons of priests and had kept the ecclesiastical vestments of their Christian predecessors. Still-standing churches and the perpetuation of pilgrimages to ancient monasteries and the commemoration of religious feasts, particularly those of Transfiguration and Assumption, a practice still attested among the Hemshinli of Turkey, are all noted as indices of crypto-Christianity.

Other elements that indicate a sense of national identity included the maintenance of patronymics often with double names (for example, Ali-Sarkis, Karapet-oglu, Mahmo-Hovannes), a powerful if not exclusive endogamy, and the persistence beyond conversion of prejudices against rival groups through insults such as "sandal-eating Greeks," "crappy Armenians," and "converted Mingrels." Armenians sometimes referred to the Hamshentsis derogatorily as *Hay-Laz* (Armenian Laz). Father Dashian observed:

> To my often repeated question at Tortum or elsewhere to know who they really were, they always answered by the stereotyped formula of the Islamized: "We are Islam." But these Islam knew that they were various races of Islam. When we asked them: Are you Turks, Laz, or others, they answered categorically no, adding that they were neither Turks, nor Laz, nor Gurji [Georgians], nor Kurds, nor Cherkess, in other words, neither one nation nor one race specific to the country. But neither can they say, "We are Armenians," because Armenians and Christians have become synonyms. The same is true in many other places. "Our forefathers have found the true religion [Islam], and that is enough for us." Such is their final answer. On the other hand, they often boasted that their ancestors had built the magnificent churches, both those still standing and transformed into mosques and those in ruins. It goes without saying that here the Armenian Muslim woman has preserved better her dialect and Christian ways.[34]

Use of the Armenian language, openly by the women, more cautiously by the men, a practice attested until the present in Turkey, is taken by

[34] Dashian, *La population arménienne*, pp. 80-81.

Armenian observers as solid evidence of the true identity of the Hamshentsis.

From the Completion of Islamization to Ethnic Cleansing

Nineteenth-century authors mention a second wave of Islamization between 1840 and 1844. This time, attacks against the Armenian language (as well as Georgian and Greek), banned as "the language of infidels" carrying heavy fines, were added to the forcible conversion. This prohibition was coupled with the implementation of Islamic education and establishment of religious schools or *medreses,* which increased in the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Once more, the greater resistance of women was noted. They are said to have chased the mullahs out of the villages on many occasions. Since they had less contact with the outside world, the women often spoke only Armenian. Haykuni reported that in the 1860s, some of them secretly placed their child in the Christian families in the cities, telling their husband that the child had drowned or been eaten by wolves. By contrast, for men the seasonal exit from villages for work and conscription for military service led to more rapid assimilation.

From a political point of view, there is a context of international tensions and military and institutional crisis in the nineteenth century: Greek independence; trouble with Mehmed Ali of Egypt; wars with Russia; European pressure in favor of Christian minorities; creation of a Catholic millet under French patronage, and so on. The *Tanzimat* reforms beginning in 1839 all appear as being coerced by external powers or as efforts to neutralize European pretexts for interference. To nineteenth-century territorial losses were added religious losses through the growing conversion of Oriental Christians to Catholicism or Protestantism, implying a diminution of Ottoman control and authority.

In this period and especially after the Treaty of Paris (1856) ending the Crimean War and the accompanying *Hatt-i Humayun* reform edict, there was a significant increase in apostasy back to Christianity among Greek converts to Islam. Thus, 2,000 to 3,000 Pontic Greek-speaking Muslims were able to reclaim their Christian faith and, with the encouragement of the Athens government, resettled in Greece. Without external support, however, the Armenian converts who sought to follow this example did not succeed. Many were forced to emigrate for

fear of retaliation. They fled to the coastal regions of the Black Sea, either westward to Trebizond, Samson, and Sinope, which were more protected from arbitrary action, or eastward and northward to the Caucasus and the Crimea—from Batum to Sukhum, Gadauta, Novyi-Afion, Sochi, and as far as Ekaterinodar (Krasnodar) and other towns in the Kuban. The pressure on those who remained only increased, especially after the completion of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus (surrender of Shamil, 1859, and of Abkhazia, 1864), when countless thousands of Mountaineers from the North Caucasus fled to the Ottoman Empire. Exchanges of populations between the Caucasus, the Balkans, and Anatolia would take place once again during and immediately after the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78.

The pan-Islamism of the Hamidian period, during which an attempt was made to use Islam as the ultimate mortar to hold the empire together, unleashed a new wave of forced conversion. Selim Deringil has studied the organization of Muslim missions on the model of and against the increasingly active Protestant missions.[35] The Armenian massacres of 1895-96, a bloody response (with up to 200,000 victims) to Armenian and European demands for reforms, were also accompanied by Islamization. In this period, there was important emigration not only of the Christian Hamshentsis but also of the Muslim Hemshinli who took refuge along the Caucasian coastline from Batum to Sukhum. This combined group was made up of 15,000 to 20,000 persons, according to the research published in the Armenian ethnographic journal *Azgagrakan handes* in Tiflis.[36] The author, who does not mention the religion of the Hamshetsis as though it went without saying that they were Christians or had reconverted to Christianity, nevertheless noted their particularism based on place of origin and their distinct social and religious practices. The Hamshentsis who remained in Turkey also served as migratory seasonal agricultural workers, thus main-

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[35] Selim Deringil, "L'Empire contre-attaque: les missionnaires ottomans à la fin du XIX^{e} siècle," oral communication at François Georgeon seminar, Paris, EHESS, January 1995. See also his *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

[36] Hakob Muratiants, "Hamsheni hayere," *Azgagrakan handes* [Ethnographical Review], vol. 4 (1898): 17-143, vol. 5 (1899): 361-406, vol. 6 (1900): 109-58. For a study of this journal, see Claire Mouradian, "La revue ethnographique arménienne *Azgagrakan Handès* (1895-1916)," *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique* 31:2/3 (1990): 295-314.

taining links with their compatriots who had crossed into the Russian Empire.

It is difficult to estimate the actual size of the Hamshen population because of insufficient census data and conflicting Armenian and Turkish sources. Aside from the numerical aspect, there were also the shifting of state and administrative boundaries and problems of identifying the various groups. Thus in the case of the Laz, for example, the ethnonym can designate either a precise ethnic group or the whole population of much of the Pontic coastline. Hamshentsi and Pontic Armenians are sometimes used synonymously in nineteenth-century sources. An Armenian researcher in Sochi (himself a native of Hamshen) who compared several Armenian, Russian, and Turkish statistics, gave the number of Pontic Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1914 as 160,00, of whom 81,000 were Hamshentsis, half of these being Muslim. Large numbers of Hamshetsis had already emigrated to Russian territory after the 1895 massacres.[37]

Communal life in the vilayet of Trebizond seems to have been fairly active despite the relatively small number of Armenians. The Armenian element undoubtedly benefited from the presence of the large Greek population and of a number of Catholic institutions. According to a monograph on the Armenians of Pontus, there were 155 schools and 145 churches, monasteries, and chapels in the region on the eve of World War I, not counting Catholic establishments. Some fifteen newspapers or bulletins likewise bore witness to the revival of political life during the euphoric period following the Young Turk revolution in 1908. There were attempts to return to Christianity at this time, as, for example, Ali Bey (an orphan of 1895) who reclaimed his Christian name of Harutiun but who soon was compelled to flee to Russia.[38]

In 1915, the region shared in the common Armenian agony of death marches, massacres, and drownings. Monsignor Hovhannes Nazlian (Jean Naslian), the Armenian Catholic bishop of Trebizond, has shown that the Catholics and Protestants were not spared any more than the Apostolic Armenians. Even though conversion to Islam, which was sometimes offered to women and children as an alternative to death, did not always guarantee protection, the period nonetheless witnessed one of the largest surges of conversion. The fate of the long-converted Hemshenli population was apparently better, albeit there is little pre-

[37] Torlakyan, "Hamshenahayeri ev pontahayeri bnakavayrere," p. 208.
[38] Hovakimian, *Patmutiun Haykakan Pontosi*, p. 168.

cise evidence concerning them. At the time of the entrance of the Russian troops into Trebizond in 1916, a number of Armenian families were still found in the region. They would vanish, however, through massacre or flight during the Kemalist "War of Independence," which was supported by the notoriously cruel Topal Osman Pasha and other Laz bandits.

For both Turkey and Russia, the chaos of World War I continued in the following years. In the Caucasus, political changes brought about short-lived independent nation states and the advances and retreats of the Red and White armies. After the Sovietization of the Caucasus region in 1920-21, Armenian Hamshentsi communal life resurfaced. In Abkhazia, Ajaria, and Krasnodar, the Hamshentsis were allowed to have newspapers, schools, theaters, and dance groups until the 1930s when they were subjected to the Stalinist terror, and then during the closing months of World War II, some Hamshentsis were deported to Central Asia. Like the Meskhs, they were not rehabilitated until 1968. Several historical studies and collections of poetry relating to the Hamshetsis date from this period of the "Thaw."[39] At the time of the *perestroika* under Gorbachev in the 1980s, there was an active press campaign in Erevan, Krasnodar, and Moscow to revive the Hamshentsi community through educational and cultural activities and compatriotic societies supported by the Soviet Armenian government and these endeavors have continued in the post-Soviet period.

The Hemshinli of Turkey: An Ethnic Group?

The Hemshinli or Hemşinli continue to define themselves today according to the name of their district. Since the 1950s, those who have migrated to cities have created compatriotic associations for mutual help or for the promotion of tourism and cultural development of their native villages. The characterization of these people as an ethnic group is occasionally accepted by some Turkish authors. All of this is carefully hidden, however, by the members of the group because of the risks involved, as can be seen by the difficulty of approach by Ben-

[39] See several volumes of poetry, *Hamshena Dzayn* [Voice of Hamshen] edited in Krasnodar or Erevan in 1971, 1979, 1989, and folklore in 1981 and 1986. As a first, an international conference on the Hamshen Armenians was organized in Adler/Sochi, October 13-15, 2005.

ninghaus and others during their fieldwork.[40] In fact, Benninghaus was questioned by the security services after his conversation with a Hemshinli informant at Ankara.

Benninghaus divides the Hemshinli population in Turkey into two groups, in addition to migrants scattered in large metropolitan areas such as Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, and Izmit: 1) In the west, in the province of Rize around Camlihemşin (Jamlihemshin), an estimated 15,000 to 29,000 persons in 1975; 2) In the east, in the district of Hopa near Artvin, around 25,000 persons. Those in the west speak a Turkish dialect, while those in the east use an Armenian dialect, Hemşince (Hemshinje) or Homshetsma, with a mixture of Turkish and Laz vocabulary. Members of the eastern group identify themselves by the Armenian ethnonym "Hamshetsi." or "Homshetsi." They did not indicate this dialect as a second language in the Turkish census of 1965, the only one in the Turkish republic since 1927 which collected data relating to national identity through questions about the use of a first or second non-Turkish language. Nevertheless, the use of Armenian in the 1960s was attested by Georges Dumézil. During his stay in Istanbul, the famous linguist-anthropologist collected and translated tales in this dialect from young men native to the region.[41] Yet the dialect or Armenian words used together with Turkish were not perceived (or acknowledged) as such by the speakers. It is clear that numerous, slightly distorted Armenian toponyms survive in the Hamshen country, such as Mount Kachkar or that of a monastery, the site of popular pilgrimages, Khazenavank (Khachik vank). Similarly, before the compulsory adoption of surnames in 1934, the onomasticon had preserved Armenian patronymics: Abeloghlu, Artinoghlu, Avedoghlu, Kirkoroghlu, and so forth.

Benninghaus notes a discrepancy between history, culture, memory, and perception, or at least acknowledged perception. The repression of Armenian origin seems much stronger since the resurgence of the Ar-

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[40] Cf. Benninghaus, "Zur Herkunft und Identität der Hemşinli," p. 486. Neal Ascherson also wrote about the arrest and jailing by Turkish authorities of the German researcher Wolfang Feurstein in the 1960s because of his interest in the Laz language. See Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea*, pp. 203-04.

[41] Cf. Georges Dumézil, *Notes sur le parler d'un Arménien musulman de Hemshin* (Brussels: Académie royale, 1964); "Trois récits dans le parler des Arméniens de Hemshin," *Revue des études arméniennes*, n.s., 2 (1965): 19-35; "Notes sur le parler d'un Arménien musulman d'Ardala (vilâyet de Rize)," *Revue des études arméniennes*, n.s., 4 (1967): 135-42.

menian question and the demands for recognition of the genocide, which occasionally assumed a violent form during the decade of 1975-85. Benninghaus reported that his informants were offended that the Hemshin could be considered to be Armenians, since their Hemshinli "compatriots" had the reputation of being very peaceful while "the Armenians are terrorists and fanatic Christians, who would never have given up their faith."

As in the preceding century, the Hemshinli have entrenched themselves behind a Muslim or regional identity. Kirzioğlu's theories of Turkic origins have gained wide acceptance. The Hemshinli identity is also defined by their dispersion and homesickness (also found among the Armenians of the Diaspora). The sense of belonging to the group is maintained by the return to the village in summer and through various compatriotic associations. The first of these associations was founded in 1949 in Ankara by a group of Western Hemshinli, that is to say, by Turkish speakers who were more urbanized and educated. This is only a seeming paradox, since Armenian speakers probably did not feel the same need of offsetting acculturation. The activities of the two groups were likewise different. In the west, they are often found in the food trade (bakers, confectioners), restaurants, and hotels. In the east, they tend to be in trades connected with transportation (a reminder of their ancient role of guardians of the roads).

Traditional costumes inspired by the Laz dress, particular headgear, and folk music with the characteristic use of bagpipes (*tulum*) are some of the outward signs of separate identity in the east, especially in rural districts. Wooden dwellings with special shapes, particularly the roofs whose peculiarity has been noted by ethnographers, have been perpetuated by émigrés in Russia and the Caucasus. In the past, even the churches of this region were made of wood. The most interesting aspect without a doubt is the celebration of Christian feasts such as Vardavar (Transfiguration), identified by its Armenian name and the occasion for annual gatherings in the latter part of July. This is one of the most popular holidays with a national character, prominent in the Armenian liturgical calendar. After the Christianization of the country, this pagan feast, in which the temple of the goddess of love Astghik was adorned with roses and other flowers (whence the erroneous folk etymology of the name *vardavar* = adorned with roses), continued to be marked by important pilgrimages and festivities, in which the participants tossed water on each other. This is probably the feast most

easily redefined as "folkloric" while at the same time bearing witness to the attachment to Armenian traditions.

Endogamy remains strong and desirable. Marriages with neighboring Laz occasionally take place, but they are avoided when possible, citing linguistic differences or the unpleasant character of the Laz and their tendency to blood feuds. Might these be memories of ancient conflicts between "valley lords" and the oppressive role played by the Laz *beg*s as in the case of Kurdish begs in other regions? The Laz especially seek to marry Hemshinli girls but do not give their own in exchange, since locally, where their respective identities are clear, the more-recently-converted Hemshinli always remain suspect of being crypto-Christians.

In their publications, the Hemshinli hold themselves to be Turks. There probably is no reason to doubt this belief, but they also consider themselves to be a group apart with strong internal cohesion. The Hemshinli regional identity appears as a substitute for ethnic identity. It may also be stronger than is observed by outsiders. Some Turkish Armenians having performed their military service in this region have related that when they met Hemshinli the latter secretly prided themselves on their Armenian origin. The repression of national identity would then be explained here more by the psychology of conversion than by the taboo of the national question and of the Armenian Genocide in present-day Turkey. Is it a strategy of disguise by a threatened and isolated minority or the superposition of several identities? Similarly, there is the question of knowing whether the Islam of the Hemshinli is a superficial adhesion to the state religion as the result of forced conversion or whether their formerly admitted crypto-Christianity corresponds as well to an attempted syncretism of two faiths and to a form of "popular Islam" found in other parts of Asia Minor. To seek answers to questions relating to ethnic and religious minorities, new paths must be opened. Archival research and field investigations as well as comparative studies in a more dispassionate political context than the prevailing one will be required.